**Supporting Working Parents: Pregnancy and Return to Work National Review**

Questionnaire response from employers and industry groups addressing issues of pregnancy, parental leave and return to work

**Questionnaire Number: 45**

**Employer name: University of Western Sydney**

**Part C Questionnaire Response**

None of these listed tasks in my opinion are 'difficult' for large and established employers. The uncertainty and change caused by having an employee proceed on parental leave is no more momentous that any for staff member taking extended leave and needing to be accommodated. We have an assumption that ongoing full time employees are stable and easy to manage - and yet the unexpected can occur to any employee and their ongoing tenure with an organisation cannot be assumed (but we do anyway).

Good Practices: In 2005 this University changed its Maternity leave to Parental Leave - thus enabling men to access paid leave for caring, and ending the practice of confining the broken career path and periods of part time work associated with caring to only women. This is the one way that major societal change will occur, when more men are participating in caring responsibilities (as opposed to full time work) and who are then seeking to have the nature of their work role, or their hours of work adjusted to support their life balance.

A further good practice adopted by some in the higher education sector is the payment of parental leave on a pro rata basis to those employees who have been in that workforce for less than 12 months. A factor that impedes women's career opportunities is that most employers will only offer paid leave to employees who fall pregnant while with their organisation (i.e. employee in the organisation for at least 12 months at time of birth) thus women planning to fall pregnant are reluctant to pursue career opportunities elsewhere because it may then compromise their eligibility for employer paid parental leave. They may be similarly constrained from leaving the employer post pregnancy if there is a return of service obligation attached to paid parental leave. This 'frozen' period of employment when women are not pursuing career opportunities as they arise must amount to a cost at a national level - when women do not realise their potential, or do not capitalise on their education and skills acquired, Australia loses. There is significant wasted human capital because of the way parental leave and the careers of female parents are managed.

A further good practice is the requirement by WGEA that 'employers of choice for gender equality’ note how many women (and men) moved roles once they returned from parental leave. There is significant research that shows women's careers are often thwarted once they return from parental leave and require greater flexibility in their workplace. Many women move sideways in their organisation in order to access roles where flexible work practices are more acceptable - often in what are considered 'soft' or 'feminised' roles - so taking account at a national level not only of how many women (and men) return from parental leave, but also of how many who subsequently shift roles may serve to make visible the reality of what actually happens to many women's careers once they become parents.

Finally, there is a bias against people who have spent period of their career working part time, or out of the workforce due to caring responsibilities. When assessing 'merit' either in recruitment processes, or when making any evaluative decision regarding an employee's output and merit, there needs to be attention paid to 'assessment of achievement relative to opportunity'. To not do so is to privilege those whose career path has been continuous and full time - a traditional model of an employee that is increasingly irrelevant and not representative of the contemporary Australian workforce. Women are frequently disadvantaged, under assessed and overlooked when their career paths are compared to those of their male counterparts, and to others who have not had career setbacks and cul de sacs due to family responsibilities.